Families who flee

The number of refugees in the world more than doubled in the decade since 1981—from 8 million to over 18 million in 1992. The great majority of those who flee war or persecution across national borders do so as family units, and 80 per cent are women and children.

"The decision to become a refugee is usually a family decision", says Susan Forbes Martin, co-founder of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. "Family patterns, and particularly extended family patterns, determine who becomes a refugee and where they go."

Thus, intact families may flee an emergency, or older males may send women and children away from a threatening situation while they remain behind to guard land or property or fight a civil war. Those who leave generally seek refuge where relatives or kinsfolk live. Strategies change over time—various family members may return to their homes or join their relatives in flight, depending on the level of danger and opportunities for subsistence.

Initial damage to refugee families

The process of seeking refuge and the conditions which force this action bring death to many and trauma to the survivors.

Maria Ana de Jesús Rodríguez testified at a public hearing last year that families from her village in Central America fled in 1980 after tortures and murders were inflicted on them by military forces; that four in the group were killed crossing into a neighbouring country; and that, while seeking to return to their homeland the next year, 36 more died under air attack in the same area.

Canon Burgess Carr, director of the Episcopal Migration Ministries and formerly Secretary-General of the All-Africa Council of Churches, remembers stories from the 1970s told him by Burundi mothers. Their families were pursued by soldiers "from burning villages into the tall grass, where, to prevent the discovery of the entire group, they had to silence crying infants for ever by crushing their babies' skulls between their knees".

Natural forces also decimate families on the run: storms that swamp dilapidated craft on the open seas, droughts, floods and mud-slides. Filsan Darman, who provided social education for women and children for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Somalia and is now running a relief programme for displaced Somalis, spoke to a mother who saw two of her children killed by lions during their flight from civil war.

Sometimes family units are destroyed completely. Boys from southern Sudan, for instance, are in fear of attack by one side in the civil war or conscription by the other. For years they have been fleeing into Kenya and Ethiopia *en masse*, and by 1988 four out of five of the 180,000 inhabitants of the Itang camp in Ethiopia were unaccompanied males. The fathers of many of them had been killed, and sisters and mothers had been raped and abducted.

World-wide patterns

Refugees are not concentrated in any one part of the globe. They come in great numbers from Indo-China, central Asia, the Horn of Africa, southern Africa, the eastern Mediterranean coast, the Caribbean and Central America—regions where bitter conflicts have been exacerbated by underdevelopment, environmental degradation, ethnic or religious tensions, harsh repression or natural disasters. In only one week in 1991, 1.5 million people flooded the border areas of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and in 1993 fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina and adjacent lands is setting off a mass exodus within Europe.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was created in 1951, in the aftermath of the Second World War, to provide international protection to refugees and to seek durable solutions to their problems. It is estimated that World War II cre-

ated some 17 million refugees—almost as many as there are today. However, the resettlement of refugees has proved more difficult in recent years than during the immediate post-war period, while voluntary repatriation, despite increased opportunities stemming from the end of the cold war, is fraught with innumerable and complex problems.

For example, while hundreds of thousands of refugees are returning to Afghanistan, more than 5 million continue an exile that for many has gone on for 13 years. Tribal conflicts, land-mines and long stretches of parched land stand between families and their home villages.

For more than 2 million Palestinians registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the wait has gone on even longer. The first wave of refugees was created in 1948, and it is common to find Palestinian children who are the fourth generation of their families to live in the same refugee camp.

Impact on families

Refugee families must cope with the trauma of separation from their native land and from friends and relatives. The effects have been noted in places such as the Site 2 camp in Thailand, which has been home for more than 100,000 Cambodians who fled their country in the 1970s and 1980s. Observers have noted the orderly appearance of row upon row of thatched huts extending as far as the eye can see—and, at second glance, a deep-seated malaise. Especially prior to recent repatriation under United Nations auspices, residents were afflicted by depression, suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, crime and sheer boredom. "There were almost no medical problems", recalls François Luigi, who worked with displaced Cambodians and is now in charge of recruitment for Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders), "but there were tremendous psychological problems."

To a greater or lesser extent, families must depend on the charity of others. Approximately one half of the world's refugees receive international aid from UNHCR and a host of non-governmental organizations, and roughly half of them live in camps. Those not receiving international assistance usually require help from friends, relatives, communities or Governments. Even individuals with professional skills may have a hard time finding work.

For the majority of refugee families that are headed by women, the difficulties are compounded. Mothers who need to attend to their children are scarcely able to seek employment. Women are vulnerable to rape, harassment and robbery. In societies where clan identity is determined through the male line, families headed by women may lose their affiliation and, since so much relief assistance is channelled through clans, become cut off from aid.

Family structures undergo change, as traditional roles take strange twists. Wives continue to prepare food, gather wood and care for children, but as de facto heads of households. Husbands, when they are present, cannot fulfil their role as providers. This can lead to family tension, domestic violence or abandonment. "The women have a lot to do, but the men feel helpless looking at their wife and children, and not being able to help them", Somali relief worker Filsan Darman says. "They just run away."

UNHCR has developed training programmes to assist refugee workers in recognizing these socio-economic changes in the community in order that programmes can be developed to support the families' adjustment.

Children tend to be more adaptable to new settings than their elders, and to learn foreign languages faster. They often serve as a conduit for information between their family and the outside world, in the process taking on some of the attributes of parents. Role inversions like this can result in intergenerational conflicts.

In many refugee situations, children have witnessed atrocities or committed atrocities themselves. Tizita Belachew, a Somali who observed refugees and displaced people in Ethiopia for the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, saw the effect of nearly continuous war and famine: "The typical 17-year-old you talk to has witnessed 17 years of brutality. They are survivors, but most of them don't have a plan for life. The traditional respect of children for their elders is breaking down. Most of the kids go to school with guns."

The strengths of refugee families

Despite the battering that families take when they become refugees, the family remains an irreplaceable source of strength. Relatives help with child care and fill the gaps caused by the absence of other family members. The shared purpose of family

life provides a fixed point of reference within an uprooted existence.

Extended family relations are especially important. In Africa, for instance, refugees crossing borders drawn up in artificial fashion by colonial authorities often arrive in communities of their own tribe or clan. "Most of them speak the same language, and in past times frequented the same markets", says Nana Apeadu, a Queen Mother from a Ghanaian village who is active in refugee relief. "So they're welcomed as relatives in the African style. Governments help, chiefs help, the communities help."

Refugees have demonstrated great resilience and compassion in repairing broken families. In many settings, refugee orphans are adopted by refugee families. New family units are improvised. Nana Apeadu is familiar with a 28-year-old refugee woman from Liberia who takes care of nine individuals, including uncles, cousins and children of relatives who have been slain.

When taking decisions about returning to homelands, extended family contacts are crucial. "Family communication networks", as Susan Forbes Martin of the Women's Commission calls them, are the most relied-upon source of information about security on the other side of a border.

Refugee families in Africa and West Asia

A good deal of international attention to the plight of refugees has been focused on the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia. Following are short summaries of the conditions of families leaving countries that have experienced drastic upheaval.

A brutal struggle in the countryside of **Mozambique**, where insurgent forces are known to have had the backing of the Government of South Africa, brought murderous attacks on villages augmented by rapes or severe beatings of women. Throughout the 1980s, tribally related kinsfolk in Malawi, itself an impoverished country, responded generously to the needs of Mozambican refugees. Farmland and communal support were quickly provided until the number of refugees—currently estimated at 1 million—swelled to unmanageable proportions. A recently negotiated truce and a United Nations peace-keeping plan are raising hopes that refugees can begin to return.

A civil war launched at the end of 1989 in **Liberia** ignited brutal tribal conflicts. It is estimated that nearly half of Liberia's population of 2.5 million has been displaced by the war, making for the largest percentage of refugees and internally displaced people of any nation. Relief agencies and neighbouring countries have rallied in support of families who fled across the borders. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for instance, support a general store in western Ghana where refugee women who are heads of households can earn money and other refugees can gather and socialize. In the south of Côte d'Ivoire, UNHCR provides seeds and tools and the Government allows families to resettle within its borders.

Civil wars, tribal and religious conflicts, drought and famine have stalked **Ethiopia**, **Sudan** and **Somalia** during the past decade. Refugees have moved in large numbers between these three countries according to the ebb and flow of war and persecution, and into nearby Kenya as well. Sudanese refugees are remarkable for the high percentage of unaccompanied young males, and families fleeing Somalia and Ethiopia have suffered tremendous dislocations. Large numbers of men have been killed or been separated from their families as they engage in armed conflict or migrate to other countries, notably those in the Persian Gulf, to seek work. UNHCR has recently put more emphasis on counselling for women, training its staff to deal with the effects of family losses. Sadly, clan conflicts that have intensified disorder in Somalia have carried over to refugee camps and made food distribution more complicated.

For **Palestinians**, as for the Arab culture in general, the family is at the centre of life. Even though many males are absent because of death, imprisonment or a search for work, the family continues to be a bulwark. Significantly, refugees are registered with UNRWA as family members. In camps located in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, additions to living quarters are constructed to allow common housing for extended families. UNRWA provides a wide range of services to bolster the family, including women's cooperatives, schools, day-care facilities and family clinics.

By all accounts, family structures were a key survival factor for Kurds fleeing **Iraq** in 1991, and for those who have returned in the face of great hardship and danger since then. Extended kinship ties proved to be most beneficial for those who crossed into western Iran, where a significant Kurdish population resides.

The camps in this area have been closed down, and refugees who did not return to Iraq have been assimilated into the local culture and economy.

Relief assistance and development

Support for refugee families that goes beyond the basic survival needs of food, clothing, shelter and medical care gives refugees a better chance to become self-reliant and productive. Such support in fact is a form of development assistance. There is a great need, therefore, to link development and relief assistance.

One way to do this is to tie infrastructure used at the outset of an emergency to development activities—for instance, providing seeds for farming. As soon as possible other kinds of assistance, such as offering credit to small businesses and cooperatives and setting up family clinics, schools and day-care facilities, should be made available. To reduce the antagonism between refugees and local people who also are in great need, it may be advantageous to share development aid among the two groups.

The process is not easy. The Governments of many countries are reluctant to encourage development plans which may induce refugees to stay within their borders indefinitely. Many development agencies are not experienced in working with households headed by women, or fail to take into account the significance of extended family structures.

The dynamics of refugee aid can under certain circumstances actually perpetuate dependency. Families unconvinced of the reliability of development assistance in their native land or their new place of residence may opt to remain refugees, and therefore eligible at least for emergency aid. And Governments of severely underdeveloped countries can find economic reasons to prefer that refugees remain abroad; by sending back part of what they receive in assistance or earn as workers to relatives who stayed behind, the refugees temporarily improve their country's balance of payments and ease its welfare burden.

Most urgently, the world community is called upon to help settle the disputes which cause displacement. A letter sent to Nana Apeadu by a woman who fled Liberia contains this message: "Every day I pray for peace, so that finally no one will need to know what the word 'refugee' means."

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1356–93550–November 1993–8M

Printed on recycled paper